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On civilians and intelligence

U.S. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird is reported to be considering a major innovation at the Pentagon, a civilian to be in charge of intelligence gathering and evaluating. And high time.

One of the very big lessons which came out of the "Pentagon Papers" was that Pentagon intelligence was different all through the Vietnam war period from intelligence gathered at CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) and at the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR). And there seems to be little doubt about which was the more reliable.

The Pentagon's intelligence from its own sources was guilty all through of underestimating the capabilities of the other side and of overestimating what various levels of American forces could accomplish. The most pertinent fact about it is that in 1965 Lyndon Johnson agreed to the commitment of a half a million Americans to Vietnam on the assumption that it would be all over successfully in ample time for the 1968 election.

Had President Johnson listened to CIA and State Department intelligence rather than to Pentagon intelligence he would not have made that mistake. Their reports and estimates were consistently closer to reality.

The reason for the difference is plain enough. CIA and State's INR are both staffed by full-time professionals in intelligence work, most of them civilians. There are a good many former military men in these services, but they are men (and women) who have gone perma-

nently into intelligence, not just for a short tour of duty.

Military intelligence is heavily staffed, and always so far headed, by officers to whom it is a temporary duty between regular service tours. They are not professionals devoting their entire time to intelligence. Nor are they civilians who can see such matters from a nonservice-connected point of view. It is difficult for an Army, Navy or Air Force officer to forget his own service when handling intelligence. His inevitable tendency is to hear, see, and stress any information or purported information which will enhance the role of his own service, particularly if he is going on in that service.

Ideally, the Pentagon would take its intelligence from CIA and INR. CIA has no axe to grind but its own, and there is really almost nothing it can want which it doesn't already have -- including relative anonymity and total freedom from detailed scrutiny in the Congress. A select committee of Congress goes over its budget every year. Much of it is totally secret. There are never any debates on the CIA budget in Congress. The committee is always generous to CIA. It has no special reason to turn out anything but the most objective intelligence it can manage to produce.

The Pentagon won't take its intelligence from the CIA. Human nature doesn't work like that. But it would help to have a nonservice-connected civilian in charge of Pentagon intelligence. It would reduce the likelihood of another Vietnam war.

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Why we print

The Christian Science Monitor today publishes a segment of the Pentagon papers.

It is a chapter, or episode, in the long story of the Vietnam war. Our chapter deals with a hitherto almost unknown phase of the story: a policy plan in July of 1962 to phase American forces out of Vietnam which was founded on a misreading of the real situation in Vietnam itself and which ended in a total reversal in March of 1964.

Before publishing we have carefully examined all of the material in our possession to make sure that there is no breach of national security and no danger to the welfare of any American or allied forces in Vietnam. We are satisfied that this material is of historical interest only, that not a word of it will be of any damage to the security and welfare of the United States. We are also satisfied that the publication of this material at this time is a constructive act which will help the American people and their government to a better knowledge of what went wrong and hence on to changes in the policymaking process in Washington, which clearly needs improving.

Also, it is the nature of governments to tell less than the whole truth to their people. Special pleading, unwatched and unchecked, leads to arbitrary government and deprives people of a chance to give or withhold their consent on the basis of full and balanced information. The proper role of a responsible press is to do its best at all times to tell those things which the public should know but governments would prefer to withhold.

Back in 1962 when our chapter of the study begins, the policymakers of Washington were cheerfully doing their planning on the assumption that Viet Cong insurgency in Vietnam would be overcome by the end of the year 1965. And that was a "conservative" estimate.

This happy assumption about the course of American involvement in Vietnam emerged from a meeting which began in Honolulu on July 23, 1962. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had gone there to hear various reports on the Vietnam war at the office of the U.S.

Commander in Chief of the Pacific (CINCPAC). At that conference the technicians and advisers to the commanding officer painted a very rosy picture indeed. At the end of it Mr. McNamara asked for an estimate of how long it would take to eliminate the Viet Cong. The reply, from COMUSMACV (Commander, U.S. Military Aid Group for Vietnam), "estimated one year from the time the RVNAF (Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces), the Civil Guard, and the Self-Defense Corps became fully operational and began to press the VC in all areas."

Mr. McNamara decided to play it safe and take a "conservative" view and work with a three- instead of a one-year estimate. And so the planning which began in mid-1962 and remained in effect until March of 1964 assumed that the American role in Vietnam would all be over by the end of 1965!

Yet by the end of 1965 American escalation was unrolling and the United States was on the way to putting half a million of its people into Vietnam.

How wrong can you be?

The Monitor's papers, and other segments from the same basic document, all seem to indicate that there are two remarkably accurate sources of intelligence information and appreciation in Washington. One is the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the other is an obscure and little known section of the State Department called the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR).

Over and over through these papers both CIA and INR seem to get their facts and estimates in balance and perspective whereas Department of Defense Intelligence and Military Aid Group appraisals leave much to be desired.

Not often did they underestimate the problem as massively as in July of 1962. But the record is less than impressive. The policymakers were working all through 1962 and 1963 on information and judgments which were totally discredited by events. Clearly, CIA and INR were working in the right direction and the lesson, if any, is that policymakers should listen more to those sources and less to others.